

Free on the sea

Maritime school program inspires Paralympic sailors

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DUXBURY – The Olympic dream – a challenge, a quest, a way of life for Team Eagle.

Mark Lewis' and Maureen McKinnon-Tucker's sailing team began its journey to the 2008 Paralympics in the fall of 2005. The two met through mutual friends and the Duxbury Bay Maritime School's Accessail Program.

"The Duxbury Bay Maritime School is kind of our umbrella," Lewis said. "They're our host training facility and help us with our financial and nonprofit status."

Lewis, an avid sailor since he was a young boy, was injured in a swimming accident in the fall of 2001. The spinal injuries he sustained in the accident rendered Lewis a quadriplegic. But his passion for sailing and his zeal for life kept his sailing dreams alive.

The 26-year-old Northeastern graduate was reacquainted with his love of sailing through the maritime school's Accessail program, which is designed to provide physically or

mentally challenged children and adults with the opportunity to sail with an instructor.

A paraplegic, McKinnon-Tucker sustained a spinal cord injury from a fall in August 1995. The 41-year-old mother of two, 6-year-old Dana and 8-month-old Trent, gave up on the sport of sailing for six years following her accident. Instead, she took up kayaking, an active water sport that was easier for her to handle.

Then she learned about the Paralympics. McKinnon-Tucker qualified for the 2004 Athens Paralympics as part of a three-person keelboat team. She was the first woman sailor in the Paralympics.

After hearing about Lewis' drive to sail competitively, McKinnon-Tucker decided to go for the gold again. She contacted Lewis last fall and began their campaign for the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing, China, when she was nine months pregnant. Soon after baby Trent was born, McKinnon-Tucker was ready to begin sailing again. The two finally got a chance to hit the high seas together in March, and have been making waves ever since.

The pair began sailing at DBMS in a Martin 16 sailboat. As their quest for the Paralympics grew more intense, however, so did their vessel. Team Eagle will sail its way to the

Paralympic games in a modified SKUD 18. The beautiful and highly equipped sailboat is larger than a Martin 16, making it hard to sail in the waters off the South Shore.

Because the SKUD 18 has a depth of five feet, as opposed the Martin 16's 2 feet, Duxbury low tides leave a very small window for sailing opportunities for these Paralympic hopefuls. So, Team Eagle found a new sailing home in the waters of Marblehead, and Newport, R.I., where they can be seen practicing and participating in as many races as possible.

Team Eagle is skippered by Helmsman Lewis, and crewed by McKinnon-Tucker, who mans both the main sail and jib. McKinnon-Tucker's full use of her upper extremities enables her to handle the sails comfortably from a center chair in the front of the boat.

As a quadriplegic, Lewis is harnessed inside the boat. He has limited mobility in his arms, but is able to move his shoulders slightly, with strength and gravity. Secure inside the boat, his hands are attached to handles that steer the vessel.

The limited mobility of both sailors makes it impossible for them to sail without the support of others. With the assistance of crew and family and Lewis' assistant, Haejee Kim, Team

Eagle's sails are set.

"Getting the boat off land and into the water needs to involve at least one able-bodied person on a regular basis, in order to make it work," McKinnon-Tucker said. "DBMS provides us with the support that we need so we can get on the water and just sail."

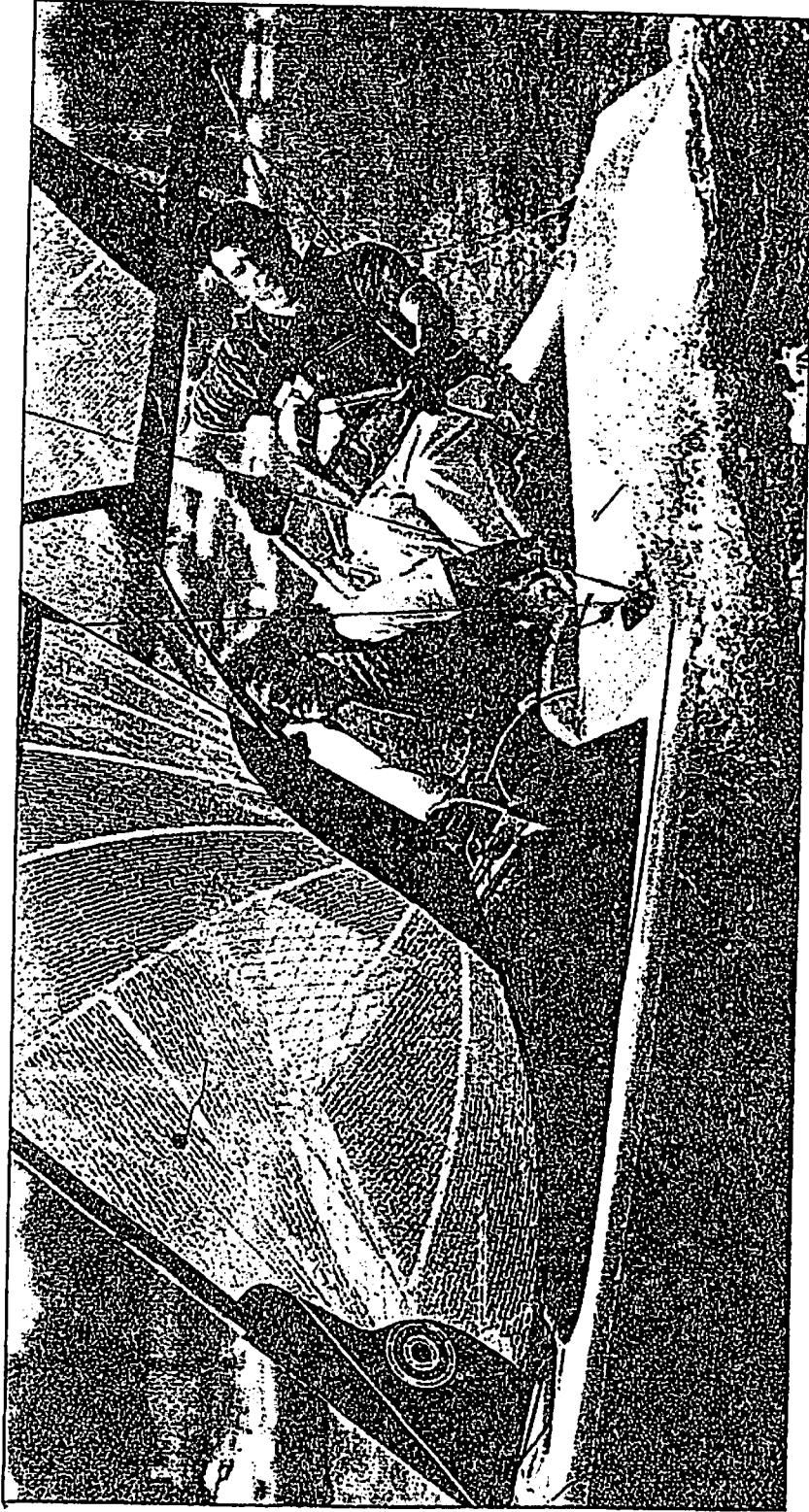
Once the pair is in position and out on the water, Team Eagle is free to fly, free to sail, and free of disability. Lewis' mother, Nancy, says her son can forget about his limitations on the water. He never lost his spirit, she said, but sailing has enabled him to live out his dreams.

"He feels so free in the water," she said, with great pride.

Team Eagle's quest for gold is not only about overcoming their own adversities, they also hope their success will encourage other disabled sailors to find their way onto the water.

"Our mission is not only to succeed in our own endeavor, which is going to the Paralympics, but we also, along the way, want to encourage other disabled sailors to get out on the water and experience what it is like to be on an equal playing field with the able-bodied and anyone else. And that is what sailing does," Lewis said.

For more information on Team Eagle, visit teameagle.org.



Maureen McKinnon-Tucker keeps the jib trimmed as helmsman Mark Lewis, keeps the pair on course during practice in their Skud 18. *More photos on Page A8.*

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